Living Yoga
by Shiva Rea

Poetry in Motion

The simple words of ancient poets provide divine inspiration for your yoga practice.

In the quiet beginning of my practice as I start to listen to my breath, I often call to mind the yogic teachings of a beloved mystic poet who can transform my inner experience with just a few thunderbolt lines: "O friend, understand: the body / is like the ocean, / rich with hidden treasures. / Open your innermost chamber and light its lamp" (The Essential Mystics, HarperCollins, 1998). Like a strong tide, these lines from the poet Mirabai instantaneously pull my mind from surface details toward the interior of my body. Whatever tension I bring to the mat softens, and my anticipation of the journey before me grows. A few moments earlier, I was dragging myself to begin; now, by simply remembering Mirabai's invocation, I am inspired to open my body to the intimacy of practice.

Like the great sages of yoga whose works are now classic texts, these beloved poets lived long ago, their teachings transmitted orally for generations before being put down in print. Some of India's most revered poets, including Mirabai, Kabir, and Lalla, created their verses from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries during the flowering of Bhakti Yoga (the yoga of devotion). They are revered as much for the simple, passionate, and often unconventional ways they lived their yoga as they are for their poetry.

Lalla (1320–1392) was a wandering yogini in Kashmir who left her marriage to devote herself fully to yoga, a radical choice for a woman at that time. Her poems express her absolute abandon to life: "My teacher told me one thing, / Live in the soul. / When that was so, / I began to go naked, / and dance" (Naked Song, Maypop Books, 1992). Lalla spent her days literally naked and dancing, a countercultural lifestyle that has never interfered with her status as the greatest poet of Kashmir. Mirabai (1498–1546), a princess of Rajasthan, became so consumed by her love for God that poetry poured out of her. She too eventually left home, despite the protests of her family, to become one of the most beloved saints of India. Also an iconoclast, Mirabai proclaimed, "The energy that holds up mountains is the energy Mirabai bows down to" (The Enlightened Heart, HarperCollins, 1993). Not all of the bhakti poets left home. Kabir (1440–1516), praised by Hindus and Muslims alike, spent most of his life in a tiny shop down a twisted Benares alley, weaving cloth and spinning his poetry.

Awakening Inner Joy

In the yoga sutra Patanjali refers to the two qualities that are part of asana: sthira, or steadiness, and sukha, happiness or inner joy. While many hours of practice can make you steady, sukha often requires more subtle nourishment. The visceral nature of poetry cuts

through the intellect and often goes right to the intuitive, feeling mind. If you are willing, you can feel a quiet shift inside your body when Hafiz says: "Awake, my dear. / Be kind to your sleeping heart. / Take it out into the vast fields of Light / And let it breathe" (I Heard God Laughing, Sufism Reoriented, 1996). It is as if your spiritual heart hears a call and says, Yes, I would like to come up for air. When you experience this awakening of the subtle body inside the muscles and bones, you begin to bring sukha into your practice and life. I have witnessed and helped many students move beyond the pushing and grunting stage of backbends, where just trying to straighten one's arms in Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose) feels like a Herculean task. It's not that I start whispering poetry in my students' ears. Rather, my voice and touch convey a tender, reverential approach to the body's soul that encourages students to release their surface effort and feel behind the sensation for the space where yoga—communion—starts to happen. When a student starts to move with sukha, it does feel as if "vast fields of light" start to open inside them.

In my own practice and in teaching Ujjayi Pranayama, the victorious breath, I often refer to a line of Kabir's: "Student tell me, what is God? / He is the breath inside the breath" (The Enlightened Heart). This poetic reminder of the subtle divinity of the breath usually allows my practice or teaching to go 10 notches deeper.

Burning Your Beliefs

Often my poetic teachers remind me to let go of limited ideas and tentative actions and to dive deeper into life. The words of well-known Muslim poets Jelaluddin Rumi and Hafiz resound across the centuries like a muezzin's call to prayer. Rumi's own teacher, Shams, threw all of Rumi's theology books into a pond. In that spirit, Rumi offers this reminder: "You've been walking / the ocean's edge, holding / up your robes to keep them dry. / You must dive naked under, / and deeper under, a thousand times deeper!" (The Illuminated Rumi, Broadway Books, 1997). Sometimes these lines are all I need to lift up into a Handstand or take a creative leap instead of playing it safe. Hafiz has his own iconoclastic call to ignite the energy of being alive: "Spill the oil lamp! / Set this dry, boring place on fire!" (I Heard God Laughing).This is no adolescent search for continual excitement, but rather a soulful insistence that we need to bring passion to every precious moment. Sometimes our ideas control the free flow of our life energy. Although learning to surrender habits and conditioning is part of the yogic path, yoga practitioners can get entrenched in our beliefs about the correct way of doing things just as easily as anyone else. With a poetic invitation, Rumi points out that we need to move beyond our attachment to our judgments: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, / there is a field. I'll meet you there" (The Illuminated Rumi).

Rumi also illuminates the tendency for overcontrol that can so easily creep into life and yoga practice. He cautions that when we think we're totally in control, "With dignified authority, / We are charlatans... / or maybe just a goat's-hair brush in a painter's hand" (The Illuminated Rumi). Rumi is not just exposing our illusions of control and authority as a deep masquerade that always gets swept away by winds of change. He's also pointing out that we are the rough instruments of God, and that we need to find a balance

between harnessing our life energy and letting go into grace.

In yoga, poetry can be a wild card that playfully goes beyond technique and methodology, like a fresh breeze that comes from nowhere. This is poetry's great gift: It communicates directly with our instinctual self. We read Rumi's words: "I was dead, then alive. / Weeping then laughing. / The power of love came into me, / and I became fierce like a lion, / then tender like the evening star" (The Illuminated Rumi). And we experience the state of inner communion, not just an explanation of how to get there.

In my experience, taking poetry books off the shelf and inviting them to live by your yoga mat or bed allows you to interact with these teachers spontaneously, opening to their wisdom as you feel the need. When a particular line of poetry strikes you, I suggest etching it in your memory so that you can repeat it to yourself like a koan, letting its meaning seep down into your body, mind, and soul. Try applying poetry while you are on your mat and see what unfolding occurs. You may start to discover images that bring your inner yoga alive. Trust what inspires you. Knowing which tone will have the greatest therapeutic effect is part of the art of living yoga. Learn to tell when your soul needs a dose of poetry or a dash of the more practical Patanjali.

Along with the mystics, you may also find more recent poetic sources that speak to you. For many people returning to the embodied wisdom that hatha yoga practice nurtures, these famous lines by the contemporary American favorite Mary Oliver have become an anthem: "You do not have to be good. / You do not have to walk on your knees / for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. / You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves" (New and Selected Poems, Beacon Press, 1993). n

Shiva Rea offers her gratitude to the translators for making these love poems to Spirit available. *Shiva teaches vinyasa yoga and leads adventure retreats and workshops around the world. She can be reached at www.yogadventures.com.*